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Article (Accepted Version)

Price, Hollie (2015) A “Somewhat homely” stardom: Michael Denison, Dulcie Gray and refurnishing domestic modernity in the postwar years. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 12 (1). pp. 25-44. ISSN 1743-4521

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## **A “Somewhat Homely” Stardom: Michael Denison, Dulcie Gray and Re-furnishing**

### **Domestic Modernity in the Post-war Years**

**Hollie Price**

#### **Abstract**

The husband and wife acting duo, Michael Denison and Dulcie Gray, achieved popular acclaim in British cinema during the 1940s, Gray in *They Were Sisters* (1945) and Denison in *My Brother Jonathan* (1948). Following the success of *My Brother Jonathan* (in which Gray also appeared), the couple’s star status was soon cemented by roles together on screen, including notably *The Glass Mountain* (1949), *The Franchise Affair* (1951), *Angels One Five* (1952) and *There Was a Young Lady* (1953). As a result of these roles in popular films and images of the couple in extra-cinematic culture, a picture of cosy, domestic consensus became irrevocably associated with Denison and Gray’s status as British film stars, much to Denison’s later chagrin.

Rachael Low’s *History of the British film* suggests that British actors and actresses have not been deemed worthy of the glamorous connotations of star status because they are ‘somewhat homely in comparison with legendary international figures’ (Low, 1971: 263). In this period, the Denisons’ star image was characterised by the ‘homely’: by a vision of their domestic life together as at once aspirational, ordinary and English. However, this paper argues that their stardom can be resituated as a post-war reformulation of modes linking British stars with ideas surrounding domestic modernity in middlebrow culture of the inter-war years.

Therefore, Low’s label of homeliness can be re-defined as a key characteristic of the distinction, promotion and reception of popular British stardom in the immediate post-war period.

**Key Words:** Domesticity, Modernity, Middlebrow, Englishness, Post-war, Cultural History

Following in the footsteps of Alison Light, who describes ‘a modernity which was felt and lived in the most interior and private of places’ (Light, 1991: 10), a whole host of recent studies of literature and culture has redefined modernity in relation to the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup>

The growing suburbs and increasing consumer power of the lower-middle and middle classes meant that the private home became central to establishing a modern identity in inter-war Britain. In 1934, J.B. Priestley’s *English Journey*, locates ‘New Britain’ in suburbia. He describes: ‘great cinemas and dance-halls and cafés, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars’ (Priestley, 1934: 401).<sup>2</sup> In the suburban home, Moderne style fittings, including the chromium-plated cocktail bar, streamlined Bakelite wirelenses and Art Deco style furnishings evoked a Hollywood vision of modernity in the British home.

In the late 1930s, the spaces of home linked British stars with a sense of modernity that they had so far lacked in comparison with their glamorous Hollywood counterparts. At this time, musicals starring Jessie Matthews, one of Britain’s most popular film stars, played a role in forming this new relationship between home and modernity on screen (Margrave, 1936: 261). Sarah Street’s study of the interior designs used in the popular 1930s musicals in which Matthews starred suggests that: ‘While the interiors in Jessie Matthews’s films were opulent and in many ways the epitome of luxurious art deco design, the availability of mass-produced furniture and fittings meant that people could adapt what they could afford in their own homes in an art deco style’ (Street, 2005: 21). Annette Kuhn’s analysis further defines the aspirational values surrounding Matthews’ star persona in relation to ‘suburbanisation/vernacular modernism’ which was characterised by a ‘middle-brow set of tastes and proto-consumerism’ (Kuhn, 2009: 191).

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However, middlebrow tastes were not limited to this shiny brand of Hollywood-influenced modernity, to the sleek modern styles epitomised by chromium bars and deco statuettes. Magazines and exhibitions promoted the modern home in relation to a more nuanced image of the indigenous British star. This is apparent from an edition of *My Home* magazine published in 1937. A regular section in *My Home* entitled 'News and Views for the Hostess', comments on the impracticalities of Hollywood's domestic interiors and the stars' craze for white fur carpets with some disdain: 'In Hollywood they are fur mad. They not only have their clothes fur-trimmed this year, but their houses are full of fur. Which seems odd when one reflects that theirs is a summer climate. I suppose it is the passion for make-believe which is so strong in all stage people' (Settle, March 1937: 24).

The section in *My Home* continues by contrasting this impracticality in the Hollywood home with the more down-to-earth British star at Elstree studios, exclaiming: 'Just imagine if the Elstree stars [...] had started such a fashion in London! It would mean a fortune for the cleaners'. While the homes belonging to Hollywood stars continued to provide a source of intrigue for the cinema-going public and to be admired from afar, the gleaming surfaces, white dressing tables and modern fabrics which furnished the glamorous lives of the stars were dismissed as impractical and mostly as 'fads' for Hollywood starlets in Settle's brief critique: in other words, as a world away from British realities.

The article links Elstree, one of the studios 'located just beyond London's outer suburbs, in the leafy Home Counties', to a vision of British stardom as more traditional, practical and in keeping with a more conservative, suburban vision of modernity (Kuhn, 2009: 191). A magazine published to offer home advice to 'middle-class women who had little outside help', *My Home* enjoyed a high circulation throughout the country, and particularly in the

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South East, where new suburban ideas of modern living were most prevalent (White, 1970: 96; Incorporated Society of British and Cogan, 1937). Middlebrow culture, which included these women's magazines, conveyed a more complex relationship between the British star and expectations of the modern home. As the following section of this article explores, the modes of address used to present British film stars and home in this period can be defined: firstly, in relation to consumer culture; secondly, with an emphasis on 'ordinariness' – a term famously used by Richard Dyer to characterise stardom (Dyer, 1997: 42); and thirdly, in relation to an idea which Alison Light terms 'domestic Englishness', in which the home was a key part of national identity (Light, 1991: 8).

In 1936, 'Homes of the Film Stars', a display held at the *Daily Mail* Ideal Home Exhibition, provides an idea of the conservative nature of domestic consumption linked to the British star. Aimed at a lower-middle class audience, the exhibition constructed an aspirational 'showcase' for all the decorations, mod-cons and furnishings that potential home owners could need (Warren, 2001: 13). 'Homes of the Film Stars' was a special display which included reconstructions of the homes belonging to Hollywood stars, for instance Clark Gable and Mae West, in addition to those of British stars. Among those included were Clive Brook's 'Tudor Lounge' and bathroom, Ronald Colman's library, Leslie Howard's kitchen and the bedroom and dining room belonging to Jessie Matthews and her husband and fellow film star, Sonnie Hale (Margrave, 1936: 253-264). In keeping with the consumerist ethos of the exhibition, the accompanying catalogue indicates the furnishing companies used for the displays and advertised where these companies could be found.

In the reconstructed bedroom belonging to Jessie Matthews, a 'huge mirror', 'glass shelves' and 'blue drapings' convey the art deco feel that her films constructed, thus reinforcing the

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analysis of both Kuhn and Street. On the other hand, in the reconstruction of Matthews' dining room, a 'handsome old oak buffet', 'walnut chairs covered in rich Red Gold Brocatelle' and a 'model of the Golden Hind' are concessions to a more traditional version of the modern home (Margrave, 1936: 259-262). With this complex characterisation of domesticity in mind, a number of the other rooms belonging to British stars are described in the exhibition catalogue as retaining an English 'character' and 'charm' (Margrave, 1936: 259). While promoting attainable modernism in the home, the rooms purported to belong to Matthews also reinforced a sense of tradition, conservatism and national identity. This dual purpose characterised the rest of the exhibition. Alongside displays of modern furnishings, light fittings and labour saving devices, displays such as 'The Story of the English Room' in 1936 and 'Period and Modern Furniture' in 1939, celebrated the historical traditions of the English home. In this setting, images of British stars were part of a cultural construction of domestic, 'suburban modernity', though one which not only emphasised links to consumer culture but also retained a conservative and particularly English character (Sugg Ryan, 2010: 49).

In 1938, a *Picture Post* article entitled 'A Day with Gracie', emphasised a similarly aspirational view of the phenomenon of the British star at home: in this case, Gracie Fields. A photo-essay format explores the domestic domains of a 'Lancashire lass who has become the First Lady of the Music Halls' (Anon., 29 October 1938: 12). Photographs show Gracie's large North London home and its glamorous interiors as she has her hair brushed in front of an over-sized dressing room table, answers the telephones next to her bed (both at the same time) and tidies up her grand dining room after a party. These luxurious interiors are made acceptable and English by views of the outside façade of her traditional brick home, in the

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style of a Tudor country house, and one photograph in which she shows her young nephew her coat-of-arms.

Another photograph shows Gracie assembling a Moderne style bar, complete with a sleek sign 'Gracie's Bar'. Although this establishes links between lustrous, modern interiors and the British star once more, the accompanying caption reinforces a view of Gracie's more down-to-earth daily life. It reads: "I like messing the place about", says Gracie, "My biggest treat is to have a new job of building started. They say I must have been born with a brick in my hand" (Anon., 29 October 1938: 13). Dedicated to revealing the ordinary scenes of everyday life for industrial workers but also to addressing the more glamorous domains of the film industry, *Picture Post* – from its launch in 1938 onwards - was extremely popular with a lower-middle class audience. Despite its left-wing editorial staff and attention to social progress, many of *Picture Post*'s articles capture a middlebrow standpoint: the aromas of 'a suburban avenue on a spring Sunday morning' (reporter, novelist and playwright, Keith Waterhouse, quoted by Hallett, 1994: n.p.n.). The photographs used as part of 'A Day with Gracie' indicate the same aspirational, domestic world as that inhabited by Matthews. However, the candid style of the photographs, showing Gracie at home and partaking in seemingly everyday activities, and captions which reference the actress' down-to-earth, working-class speaking style construct a level of 'ordinariness' as part of this image.

An earlier article in *Picturegoer* magazine on Flora Robson, a British actress known for roles in heritage dramas, emphasised these aspects of tradition and ordinariness in connection to domesticity once more. In the article, the author explains how 'he sought her out in her little house in Hampstead [...] a house you may have passed hundreds of times and not guessed that it contained one of Britain's greatest actresses' (Breen, 16 January 1937: 10). This

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situates the glamour of British stardom in an indigenous setting: Robson's home is 'intimate', 'close at hand' and the article suggests that her home could be passed on the street on an everyday basis (Babington, 2001: 10).

While the article emphasises the privacy of Robson's home life, it also draws attention to this as a national characteristic: 'You've probably seen her on the stage and screen; but her private life – is that a sealed book to you. Yes, and it is to most people; all except for a few of her intimates [...] she considers herself to be a public servant while she is working, and a private individual in her hours of leisure' (Breen, 16 January 1937: 10). These ideas on Robson's private life are linked to the rising importance of a domestic culture in the 1930s, but also a changing idea of citizenship, from defensive to progressive to which this was attached (Hubble, 2012: 206; McKibbin, 2000: 485). In Light's study of middlebrow literature of this period, she describes 'an Englishness at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private' (Light, 1991: 8). With this in mind, national community was part of a conception of domestic modernity promoted as part of middlebrow culture. As evidenced here, this conception was both influenced by and influential to the image of Robson's stardom in the 1930s.

In the 1940s, this quiet, unassuming domestic side to British stardom constructed links to national identity, which became paramount in the promotion of popular British stars within the urgent wartime need for consensus. By 1947, a film club publication on 'British Film Stars at Home' described the private hobbies of Flora Robson once more, suggesting that 'she has always loved gardening' (Lee, 1947: n.p.n.). The links to the relevance of home life to community this time took on a language inherited from the war effort. Robson is described as 'a keen "allotmenter"', in keeping with the Dig for Victory campaign taken up during the war



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years. The scratches on her hands and wrists are described as the ‘honourable scars’ of the gardener. By the end of the Second World War, the vision of a modern, domestic England established in the 1930s had gained enhanced relevance in the promotion of British stardom.

As a number of historians note, the end of the war led to a reinforcement of domestic values. As part of popular culture, the home became linked to the possibilities of post-war reconstruction and the rehabilitation of society and national identity (Highmore, 2014: 72). The Britain Can Make It exhibition in 1946 promoted new British design in the home. At the Festival of Britain in 1951, a Homes and Gardens pavilion included design solutions to the problems of the future home (Cox, 1951: 69). However, Robert Hewison suggests that ‘the modernist architecture [exhibited as part of the festival] was a lightweight framework for yet another exploration of Deep England’, in other words, the domestic vision of England established in the inter-war years (Hewison, 1995: 59).

Likewise, Claire Langhamer’s argues that there was a ‘simultaneous looking backwards and looking forwards’ when it came to imagining the post-war home (Langhamer, 2005: 343). In 1947, Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC) planned to re-launch their studios at Elstree with emerging star Michael Denison as a new beacon of post-war optimism. However, as this article explores, the promotion of Denison’s stardom in the immediate post-war years, alongside that of his wife Dulcie Gray, looked backwards to the modes of address - consumerism, ordinariness and Englishness - which connected British stars with their homes in middlebrow networks from the 1930s.

Denison and Gray initially forged their careers separately; by the late 1940s, Gray already had a moderately successful film career. In her early days at Gainsborough Studios, Gray was

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promoted as a 'Rising Dramatic Actress' in advertisements, though never in the same league as the studio's major stars, Phyllis Calvert and Margaret Lockwood (Denison, 1973: 195). Contemporary reception of her performances suggests that she was 'one of those knowing mice to whom chaps (in fiction, anyway), always return in the end' (Anon., 4 February 1949). This mousey persona, characterised by domestic duty, was conveyed by Dulcie's early role in Gainsborough's *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (d. Arthur Crabtree, 1945). In the narrative, Maddalena (Phyllis Calvert) is torn between two personalities: a sweet, obedient wife and a rebellious, glamorous gypsy woman. Dulcie's character, Nesta, an acquaintance of Maddalena's family, exemplifies the first of these types.

Dulcie's performance as Nesta in one of the film's party scenes constructs her as a polite, stuttering bystander. The other more adventurous characters frequently return to her waiting for her husband in the same position as she cheerfully repeats: 'he's sure to turn up, he always does'. Whereas Maddalena and her daughter, Angela (Patricia Roc) are dressed in glamorous gowns befitting Hollywood starlets, Nesta's gown is all dainty ruffles and bows. She exclaims honestly: 'it was a pair of curtains yesterday', thus emphasising a symbolic relationship between her character and quiet, domestic tasks and in deference to the make do and mend culture of the period. In later scenes, while Maddalena's alter ego conducts an exciting affair in Venice, Dulcie as Nesta fusses over troubles with her stove with her pinafore on and quips with her 'clever brute' of a husband. Reviews of Dulcie's early performances suggest that she was liked by critics but her appearance in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* and later as the psychologically bullied wife to a more threatening 'brute of a husband' (James Mason) in *They Were Sisters* (d. Arthur Crabtree, 1945) led to her identification as the docile homemaker to whom wayward husbands would always return. She so embodied a quiet, domestic life that the *Daily Chronicle* even threatened to nickname

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her 'Gracie Dull' (Dehn, 23 March 1952). She later remarked in interview: 'I played an awful lot of put-upon wives in those days!' (Gray, quoted by McFarlane, 1997: 174).

In 1947, ABPC took a chance on a relative newcomer to the screen: Michael Denison. ABPC was one of two firms in Britain, alongside the Rank Organisation, which were hiring actors and actresses under long-term contracts. Under the control of Robert Lennard as casting director, ABPC boasted 'a galaxy of new stars' (Warren, 1983: 91). Whereas Rank trained potential stars through the 'Charm school', Lennard 'believed fervently [...] in the theatre as a crucial, training ground' (McFarlane, 2014: 448). In need of a box-office success to kick-start the studios, ABPC warily took repertory-trained Denison on for the lead role of Jonathan Dakers in an adaptation of Francis Brett Young's extremely popular novel, *My Brother Jonathan* (signing him up for a seven-year contract in the process). Gray appeared in the same production as his love interest, Rachel. In some respects, the promotional campaign surrounding Denison's stardom was initially far removed from Gray's mousey, domestic image. The pressbook for his first leading role announces: 'Meet My Brother Jonathan – he's box office!' A framed photograph of Denison directs cinema managers towards emphasising his good looks, youthful masculinity and glamour (Anon., 1948b).

Denison's autobiography details how 'there had been various manoeuvres designed to groom me for stardom' in the build-up to *My Brother Jonathan* (Denison, 1973: 215). Orchestrated by ABPC's publicity department, these included a 'body-building suit', which, in order to disguise his long neck and drooping shoulders, had 'shoulders so wide and so soft that I had to go sideways through all double doors'.<sup>3</sup> Denison remembers: 'I was launched in it at a Savoy reception for the Press', in addition to a number of other public appearances which he describes as follows:

Quite inappropriately, since no film of mine had yet been shown, I was sent on a number of “personal appearances”. These involved appearing on stage at various cinemas after a build-up about how good I was going to be, making a short speech, and signing autographs, and being stared at in the foyer afterwards (Denison, 1973: 215).

The parading of Denison through cinemas in his big-shouldered suit gave the impression of his glamorous film star persona as the ‘visible’ distinction of stardom and as competition with Hollywood leading men (Street, 2009: 134). Denison’s public appearances chimed with a contemporary understanding of Elstree Studios as ‘Britain’s Hollywood’ and a number of reviews for *My Brother Jonathan* made transatlantic comparisons (Warren, 1983: 90).<sup>4</sup> The *Daily Herald* suggested that ‘Mr. Denison is a welcome addition to our screen leading men’ (Anon., 20 February 1948) while the *Evening News* simply said: ‘the picture brings a splendid newcomer to stardom in Michael Denison’ with ‘the soft eyes of another James Stewart’ (Anon., 19 February 1948). David Lewin at the *Daily Express*, triumphantly and somewhat boldly, stated that ‘He is a six-foot dark haired young man who will soon be talked about in Hollywood’ (Lewin, 25 February 1948).

Denison’s first major role effectively reinforced this leading man image. *My Brother Jonathan* (d. Harold French) opens with Jonathan beginning to relate to his son the story of his past as a doctor in the Midlands in the nineteenth century. The film’s narrative then takes the form of his flashback as Jonathan trains to be a doctor. A number of personal and professional setbacks befall the young Jonathan and construct him as a sympathetic character with noble intentions. In difficult circumstances, the film’s eponymous character crusades against hospital practices of overcharging patients (at a key contemporary moment following

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the National Health Service Act in 1946) and foregoes his own happiness in order to make sure his family are content.

However, Jonathan's radical idealist hopes in the poverty-stricken conditions of a Black Country town – 'with their unmistakeable echoes of Beveridge' as Andrew Spicer notes – are tempered by signifiers of his 'middle-class reliability' such as his pipe (Spicer, 2001: 48). Denison's performance of Jonathan is also endearing and reinforces this acceptably middle-class vision of modernity. For instance, at a high society ball in the film, as Jonathan dances with the love of his life – Edie Martyn (Beatrice Campbell) – he trips and bumbles along embarrassedly: this highlights his role as the underdog in comparison to a brother whom his mother praises and clearly loves more. Many contemporary reviews praised this underdog storyline but also indicated that a new star had been found in the process. In February 1948, a review featured in *Time and Tide* magazine stated that 'Michael Denison [...] is a personable new star of the sensitive charm school, who speaks the King's English as though it were his own and promises to turn into quite an asset' (Anon., February 1948). Despite Denison's 'debonair' good looks, 'soft-spoken, restrained and chivalrous' manners and Oxford education, the ordinary frustration and endearingly human portrayal of a character create sympathy for his performance as Jonathan (Spicer, 2001: 48-9).

A number of consumer tie-ins for *My Brother Jonathan* carefully negotiated this dual identity of glamour and empathy for the British star. Set in Jonathan's cottage, the opening scene of the film reveals Denison sitting in a cosy country-cottage style living room in an oversized Moderne style armchair. A tie-in advertising campaign for armchairs compared the decision to cast Michael Denison, an unknown star, with the decision to purchase an Airborne

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armchair (**Error! Reference source not found.**). According to the text featured in this advertisement:

The selection of an actor – or an armchair – depends upon personality, performance, finish, in the sphere of upholstery. ‘Airborne’ is a natural for stardom. Versatile and adaptable. Its sectional construction enables it to fulfil any role: from fireside chair to five-seater settee. ‘Airborne’ plays the part in perfect character. Here you see Michael Dennison [sic], who co-stars with his wife Dulcie Grey [sic], in the ABC film ‘My Brother Jonathon’ [sic] – and of course, the chairs are ‘Airborne’ (Daily Mail Film Award Annual Anon., 1948a).

Potential audiences for *My Brother Jonathan* were therefore instructed to direct their attention towards furnishings: as an element in the construction of the film itself and as the prospective acquisition of an attractive film star lifestyle, with the glamorous evening wear of Denison and Gray used to reinforce this aspirational image. The film’s pressbook details a special display for the ‘Airborne’ tie-up planned for shop windows, which was accompanied by the slogan ‘Two Stars are Airborne’ and which featured cardboard cut-outs of the pair perched on an armchair together (Anon., 1948b).

Published in the *Daily Mail Film Award Annual* in 1948, the advertisement played a role in a culture surrounding the optimistic return to modern homes. This return was also being promoted by Mrs M. Pleydell-Bouverie’s *Daily Mail Book of Post-War Homes* in 1944 and, following a wartime hiatus, the reinstitution of the Ideal Home Exhibition. At a time of austerity, audiences were coming face to face with increasingly acceptable consumption, which Josephine Dolan suggests negotiated ‘feminised Englishness’ and ‘conservative modernity’ (Dolan, 2007: 47,45). At the Ideal Home Exhibition in 1947, a display for *My*

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*Brother Jonathan* played a role in promoting the modern home as a part of the conservative modernity which characterised the exhibition as a whole. The film's Edwardian interiors were displayed as part of a Gallery of British Films. The catalogue indicates that the purpose of this display was to show 'the fussiness and over-elaboration of the Early-Edwardian period, dark and oppressive wallpaper, unnecessary ornaments'. This was then contrasted with a second set, in which 'the simplicity of today is emphasised – the electric fire, light furnishings and sun-lit window' (Coven, 1947: 137-8).

In both the Airborne advertisement and this Ideal Home display, the promotion of *My Brother Jonathan* reinforced an acceptance of consumer culture and a sense of a developing idea of domestic modernity in the post-war years. At the same time, Ted Black's roster of female stars at Gainsborough, as well as stars signed elsewhere under Rank, were associated with this consumer culture in comparable ways. For example, Phyllis Calvert appeared in advertisements for Power-Master refrigerators, and other actresses, including Patricia Roc and Margaret Lockwood, made a number of public appearances at the Ideal Home Exhibition, providing demonstrations of new household technologies. These images of stars in relation to the home simultaneously constructed a conservative acceptance of domesticity and consumption while also maintaining links to a more escapist model of British film stardom, which emphasised their role as aspirational figures.

Alongside the more glamorous image of Denison and Gray in the Airborne advertisement, they were promoted as an ordinary couple. While Denison's star image was emphasised individually in the early months of promoting *My Brother Jonathan*, Denison and Gray were also promoted as a husband and wife team. Denison's role as Jonathan was publicised as his first starring role following his army duties and therefore his performance alongside his wife

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in the 1948 film was in tune with contemporary concerns regarding the return to the home and marriage. Matthew Sweet's account of Shepperton studios describes how the couple 'spent two chilly winter days being driven around London in an open-top carriage, waving awkwardly at passers-by', thus endorsing their link to a national past and the historical settings of their films using the carriage, as well as connecting them as a star couple (Sweet, 2005: 207). A 1947 film club publication by Robert Stannage, which caught up with the stars on their days off, also constructed an image of companionability by expressing delight in the fact that they share the same hobbies and interest in the home with the exclamation: 'Michael and Dulcie live in a comfortable West End flat, full of old china (which they both collect!)' (Stannage, 1947: 97).

In order to reinforce this companionate image off-screen and to balance the glamorous home in Airborne's advertisements with greater attention to the everyday, realist photographs of the 'stars at home' were also released to coincide with *My Brother Jonathan*. Denison and Gray were featured in a photograph in which both are pictured helping to polish a dining room table: Denison appears with his sleeves rolled up and Gray has a pinafore round her waist, in order to emphasise the ordinariness of the roles they have in the home. This capturing of a seemingly candid view of the pair carrying out an ordinary household task anchors their contented relationship and their home life together in an identifiable reality for British audiences still facing austerity conditions.

The Denisons' star image and connections to consumerist domesticity were tempered by this realist view, constructing a link to increasingly popular ideas about the companionate marriage. According to Arthur Marwick's study of post-war British society, 'there could be absolutely no doubt as to the continued popularity of marriage as a social institution'



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(Marwick, 1996: 40). A prevalent idea in British society since the 1930s, Judy Finch and Penny Summerfield define companionate marriage as ‘the idea of marriage as teamwork’ and a ‘partnership of equals’ (Finch and Summerfield, 1991: 7). In the fictional narrative of *My Brother Jonathan*, Denison as Jonathan longs for his first love Edie – as a beautiful step away from his ordinary life – but eventually finds that real happiness is to be found with the daughter of his medical partner, the more homely and practical Rachel (Gray), with whom he shares a warm, friendly relationship working together. By the end of the war years, the idea of the companionate marriage, in which husband and wife shared emotional equality, was publicised as the ideal way to re-establish relationships in order to form a post-war image of consensus and to disguise any underlying tensions related to the return to the home.

The focus on the couple’s ordinary home life in these popular accounts was part of a contemporary trend in popular magazines such as *Picture Post* and in other Film Club publications including Stephanie Lee’s *British Film Stars at Home* in 1947. While these publications often highlighted the stars’ aspirational life styles for their audiences, they also emphasised their ordinariness. Quiet hobbies - including watercolour painting, cooking, gardening and looking after cats - are all described in intimate detail. Family life and everyday rituals are also highlighted, such as Jean Simmons’ routine of shouting ‘Mummy, I’m home!’ on her return from the studios (Lee, 1947). The realities of war are also not excluded as the edition details how David Farrar’s home life was restored following bomb damage. The photographs included emphasise this sense of the ordinary, including photographs of Jean Simmons tasting some soup, John Mills playing in the garden with his children and Anne Crawford with her hair wrapped up and wearing overalls for some interior decoration.

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Within this discourse of domestic stardom as a characteristic of post-war culture in Britain, the Denisons returned from filming in Venice to a tumult of publicity surrounding *My Brother Jonathan*.

It was extraordinary to return to London and find oneself the object of general ballyhoo [...] There were interviews for the radio and the Press; photographic sessions at the cottage and in London, and gradually there was built up in the public mind the picture of coy domestic bliss which from the first we discouraged in every way short of separation (Denison, 1973: 223).

In 1949, *Picturegoer* continued to emphasise this vision of 'domestic bliss' with an article by Mavis Dearing entitled 'Design for Living', which details the Denisons' friendly relationship and their country cottage in an overly romanticised style:

The cottage [...] is thatched and has modern plumbing and a bathroom added. When the latter addition was made it was accommodated under a thatched roof to match the original. Thus, with its quaint, latticed windows and lovely setting, the cottage looks really 'olde worlde', and it certainly does spell peace [...] In the ground that goes with it are many fruit trees and a lovely garden ... Michael and Dulcie, who is persuasive with seedlings, worked wholeheartedly upon it at weekends, tidying it up, planting, planning and pruning (Dearing, 12 February 1949: 10).

The article combines photographs of the couple performing domestic tasks, such as chopping firewood or making tea, with more conventionally desirable images of stardom. These included Gray in an evening gown held in the arms of a tuxedoed Michael, accompanied by the caption: 'the gardeners can do glamorous when the screen demands it' (**Error! Reference source not found.**). Dearing emphasises the 'inward-looking' nature of the Denisons' home life which was in keeping with the inter-war vision of 'domestic Englishness' (Light, 1991:

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8). Dearing states that their cottage is not 'a show place' for entertaining guests and holding wild parties, instead 'it is lived in by people who know how to make a home'. She then adds details on the Denisons' evenings in together 'reading up on the behaviour and care of favourite flowers'. While these attempts to show an 'ordinary' life in the Denisons' home are lacking in the realism which characterised the photograph of them polishing furniture together, the attempt to represent a rural, 'lived-in' domestic life for them emphasises a pre-war vision of 'Englishness'.

The next film in which the Denisons appeared together was 1949 box office hit *The Glass Mountain*. Highly popular with audiences (so much so that it was re-released in 1950 and 1953), Henry Cass' film is a romance set in both England and Italy. Denison stars as a composer torn between his former, ordinary life with his wife, Ann (Dulcie), and an Italian lover (Valentina Cortese) he meets when his plane is shot down during wartime service. With the establishment of Richard and Ann's initially idyllic dreams of home in the opening scene, *The Glass Mountain* constructs a recognisably domestic setting associated with the promotion of the Denisons' star image in the year leading up to the film's release. Indeed, the connections between the couple's stardom and inter-war visions of domestic modernity explored in this paper so far all become evident in this opening sequence. As part of a countryside jaunt, Richard and Ann break into a deserted country house following Ann's exclamation: 'Oh Ricky, it's the kind of house I've always dreamed of'. As the couple are left standing at the door, the camera moves away and tracks forwards into the empty house and tilts up the stairs. Richard's disembodied voice states: 'we'll need an awful lot of furniture'. As they enter one of the rooms and begin to discuss their furniture choices, their future music room fills with their imagined furnishings. A grand piano, an old settee, a winged armchair by the fire and a Chinese Chippendale mirror all flicker into view, even with a toy train moving through the

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room. As if by magic, their ideal home appears before them in the room. As the scene continues and the pair continue to imagine their lives in this ideal home, a vision of Richard and Ann dressed in elegant evening wear drift into the room with the onset of music.

The dream pair dance 'into' the camera and the scene dissolves to a view of the empty room once more. The real couple appear in the middle of the room, looking on as the dancers disappear. They are positioned as spectators in the prospective acquisition of the domestic imaginary but also, the framing of the shot constructs Denison and Gray as part of the domestic spectacle itself. Kristian Moen suggests that the mutable fantasy of the home in early American cinema was linked to the construction of film stardom as a mode of transformation from the ordinary and the everyday 'constraints of modern life' to the magical (Moen, 2013: 131, 134). Here, however, the domestic transformation on display is more conservative. The rooms being furnished are not those of a Moderne style palace but a traditional English country house. The image of Denison and Gray, and its connections with a conservative version of consumer culture, the companionate nature of their home life and their 'domestic Englishness', reinforces a sense of mutability attached to their stardom though one which overall is characterised by a stable cultural identity and a conservative sense of modernity. The image of these two stars harks back to a pre-war vision of domestic modernity as a means to imagine a bright post-war future but also for film audiences facing a difficult time of transition, for whom this star image provided a means of imagining a renewed vision of home.

In the course of the narrative, Richard becomes disillusioned with initial dreams of home that he shares with his wife. Contemporary reviews found this change of character for Denison and the subject of troubles at home unlikely considering the promotion of his

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glamorous, though profoundly domestic, life with Dulcie. One review suggested: 'It is not altogether easy to connect Miss Gray and Mr Denison with these proceedings. They suggest so completely the kind of couple whose greatest marriage problem is likely to be how many sandwiches to cut when they give a party' (Anon., 4 February 1949). By the early 1950s, their domestic star image continued to inform their appearances on screen together and the narrative role of the home. This connection to domesticity was visually reinforced by the continued presence of the couple's dog, Bonnie (who had also appeared previously in the Airborne advertisement, *The Glass Mountain* and its surrounding press): in the home of lawyer, Robert Blair (Denison) in *The Franchise Affair* (d. Lawrence Huntington) in 1951; and in the bungalow of Dulcie's airfield resident in *Angels One Five* in 1952.

In *The Franchise Affair*, Dulcie plays Marion Sharpe, a young woman accused of collaborating with her elderly mother in the kidnap of a girl in their old country house, the Franchise. Local lawyer, Robert Blair (Denison), assists her case and finds himself falling in love with Marion. Scenes in the living room of the Franchise present visual reminders of the Denisons' connections with ordinary, domestic stability. These reminders create tension as the evidence against Dulcie's character piles up, thus casting doubt on the stability and genuineness of domesticity in this underrated gothic thriller. For Robert, Marion represents an escape from the stifling domestic regimes of life at home with his aunt. Marion's rejection of his proposal of marriage indicates the continued association of Dulcie's image with a modern model of companionship, as a contrast with this old-fashioned vision of domesticity. She suggests that Robert would 'miss all the creature comforts and pampering [at his Aunt's...] that I wouldn't give you, even if I knew how', arguing that her 'adult mind' is 'no substitute for good pastry and an uncritical atmosphere'. In the final scene, Blair rejects his

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overbearing aunt's enquiry regarding dinner arrangements and the daily routine of a biscuit offered on a tray by his secretary and he seeks out Marion on-board an aeroplane bound for Canada. Although symbolic of departure from homely routine, this prospect still marked by the Denisons' image of domestic, companionate marriage, which is first interrogated as part of the thriller narrative and eventually restored anew in a less stifling context.

In *Angels One Five*, Gray and Denison's characters for the first time were not involved romantically onscreen,. Dulcie's character, however, remains connected to domestic themes. Set during the Battle of Britain, the film's action focuses on the airfield of the RAF's "Pimpernel" squadron's, commanded by Group Captain "Tiger" Small (Jack Hawkins), assisted by Squadron Leader Peter Moon (Michael Denison) and Squadron Leader Barry Clinton (Cyril Raymond) who nurture the novice, Pilot Officer 'Septic' Baird (John Gregson), who eventually dies in action. As the Squadron Leader Clinton's wife, Nadine, Gray remains unflustered and cheery even when Septic's aeroplane crashes into her bungalow at the end of the airstrip and interrupts tea and cake with her husband in an early scene. At a cocktail party held for the squadron – in an echo of Gray's early role in *Madonna of the Seven Moons* – Nadine appears wearing a delicate lace hat decorated with fabric flowers and her association with wifely devotion is once more reinforced in the dialogue. She comments to Septic and his love interest: 'I shall have to seek solace with my aging husband' and turns to switch on the wireless to hear Squadron Leader Clinton's announcements over the airwaves.

This time, however, her domestic image is part of the film's elegiac celebration of wartime resilience and community both inside and outside the home. Her husband comments on the operations room as 'our home', refers to the 'domestic activities' within and remarks on the

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‘grittiness’ of his tea following the collapse of the roof, thus connecting the war effort with a vision of enduring domesticity. Indeed, in the final moments of the film, a close-up of Captain Small’s stoical expression in the operations room – following the climax of the final air battle – dissolves to a shot of Nadine clambering through the ruins of their bungalow to light a lantern for the pilots’ flight path. Efforts to construct Dulcie’s character as an independent, ‘astonishing woman’ throughout *Angels One Five* function as part of a nostalgic vision of wartime community but also coincide with her position as a doting wife once more.

Likewise, in the 1953 light-hearted comedy and the last of the Denisons’ feature films in which they appeared together, *There Was a Young Lady* (d. Compton Bennet), Dulcie’s character, Elizabeth - a sassy secretary working for jeweller David Walsh (Denison), asserts her authority when inadvertently kidnapped by a gang of robbers in a manor house by teaching them how to do housework. In a Snow White role as part of this unconventional community, her boasts of domestic competency enable a comic reconstruction of the model of the companionate marriage as defined by shared roles. The group of men share in household tasks such as baking fairy cakes, dusting the mantelpieces and beating the carpets. Later, Elizabeth is reunited with Walsh (Denison as Gray’s romantic interest once more) in a final reinforcement of this ideal of the companionate marriage. In the film’s final moments, the couple’s appearance wandering through the grounds of their newly acquired country house in glamorous evening wear reasserts their star image and the conservative transformations with which it had become imbued in the immediate post-war years.

At this time, the Denisons’ star image and connections with domesticity suited a climate in which consumer culture surrounding the home, family life and domestic improvements was becoming increasingly optimistic. Despite the fact that Denison and Gray continued to

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make numerous glamorous public appearances, the more homely surroundings of their house in Regent's Park continued to characterise their star image. For example, in 1952, the *Daily Sketch* featured an article in which the couple posed having breakfast together, drinking cups of tea and laughing on a sofa in front of oversized antique furniture. The article describes how: 'Mr. and Mrs. Michael Denison (Dulcie Gray) live with commendable elegance in one of the Nash houses on the east side of Regent's Park among furniture which they have accumulated year by year as anniversary presents to themselves' (Anon., 3 December 1952). The Denisons' interests may have been domestic but they also belonged to an image of an elite film class, which celebrated the finer aspects of domesticity and emboldened a link between British film stars and aspirational homes in the 1950s: 'the age of affluence' (Addison, 2010: 51).

In 1955, Denison and Gray featured in a British Pathé cine-magazine entitled *Carpets Beware*, and their appearance closely mimicked their performances in the opening scene of *The Glass Mountain*. Filmed in Technicolor, the couple again have a dual identity. They are associated with their glamorous roles in films but the relatively down-to-earth pursuit of interior decoration is presented as an equally desirable recreational activity. In this short film, with the advice of a designer, the pair experiment with a miniature model of the interior of their Georgian home in Regent's Park, trialling different combinations of wallpapers, models of their actual furniture, and carpets.

Following these discussions, the film ends with a view of Denison and Gray sitting comfortably together, surveying the choices they have made (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The voice-over states: 'It's a way two stars have made their home another colourful world of their own'. As in *The Glass Mountain*, the audience has witnessed the design of this



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space, followed by a view of the couple surveying their handiwork. In contrast to the inter-war period, however, it would seem that the sense of modernity by the relationship between the British star and the home had become more confident and increasingly ‘in tune with [...] the culture of consumerism’ (Babington, 2001: 21). *Carpets Beware* is unafraid to suggest that Denison and Gray inhabit a seemingly ordinary, domestic world, though one which is characterised by a new escapism, colour and separation from the everyday, from the workaday and from the cinema audience. Here is a shift from away from their image as ‘intimate’ and ‘close-at-hand’ (Babington, 2001:10). As British film stars, the film suggests that they now ‘live in a colourful world of their own’, though one which lower-middle class and middle-class members of society, at whom the earlier middlebrow culture of domestic modernity was aimed, could now emulate.

Many thanks to Andrew Spicer, Melanie Williams and the journal’s peer reviewers, and to the participants at the ‘Exploring British Film and Television Stardom’ conference at Queen Mary in October 2014, for their helpful suggestions and advice on this article. Thanks to the staff at the Newspapers Library in Colindale, the BFI Reuben Library, the V & A Archive of Art & Design and Theatre & Performance Archives, and the British Pathé archive for their help with its research.

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<sup>1</sup> See Giles, J. (2000) *The parlour and the suburb: domestic identities, class, femininity and modernity*. Oxford: Berg, Nava, M. & O'Shea, A. (1996) *Modern times: reflections on a century of English modernity*. London: Routledge, Gan, W. (2009) *Women, privacy and modernity in early twentieth-century British writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>2</sup> In 2000, Dulcie Gray wrote a pocket biography of Priestley. In the foreword, Gray describes 'nearly fifty years of friendship' with Priestley and explains: 'My husband, Michael Denison, and I loved him [...] He gave Michael his first important professional part in a West End revival [...] and his first on his return [from the army] six years later' Gray, D. (2000). *J.B. Priestley*. Stroud: Sutton.

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<sup>3</sup> The broad shoulders of this suit are the significant characteristic of a caricature of Denison which appeared in the Turf Cigarettes series to coincide with the release of *My Brother Jonathan*.

<sup>4</sup> This transatlantic label was reinforced with Warner Brothers' post-war investment in ABPC shares.